

Portalis

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF
HAWAII AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

IN
ART

MAY 2019

By
Yoshimi Teh Soo Mei

Thesis Committee:
Charles Cohan, Chairperson
Mary Babcock
Brad E. Taylor

Acknowledgements

I would like to express the deepest appreciation to my thesis committee chair, Professor Charles Cohan for his invaluable advice and support throughout the years. My first printmaking class at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa was Charlie's screen printing class, and is the reason I got in to art. I will never forget how he saw potential in me when I couldn't. In addition, he has provided me with many artistic opportunities and thus contributed to my growth in knowledge and experience as an artist. During my graduate career, he has given me all the freedom to pursue my research, while ensuring that I do not deviate from it.

Thank you to my thesis committee member, Professor Mary Babcock for her challenging but insightful questions and suggestions that facilitated me in finding the core of my research. Without her able guidance, this thesis would not have been possible.

I would also like to thank Professor Brad Taylor, Professor Rick Mills, Professor Peter Chamberlain, Professor Scott Groeniger Professor Wendy Kawabata and Professor Debra Drexler of the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. All of whom showed kindness and understanding toward my concerns, and impacted my research and life in their own unique way.

I acknowledge that this research would not have been possible without the financial assistance of the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, through hiring me as a Graduate Assistant for the Art Department Gallery. Through this experience, I have had the privilege to work and gotten to know the incredibly hardworking and kind staffs of the gallery, this includes Wayne Kawamoto, Rod Bengston and Sharon Tasaka. They have taught me so much in regards to exhibition preparation that my thesis exhibition would not have been the same if I hadn't been a part of the gallery crew.

Last but definitely not the least, I am greatly indebted to my parents, sister and close friends who kept me sane throughout my graduate career. The unconditional love and support I felt from them motivated me to push myself and better myself, both as an individual and as an artist. This accomplishment would not have been possible without them.

Words cannot ever describe how grateful and blessed I feel to know all these amazing people. Thank you for being a part of my life.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	..... ii
List of Figures	..... iv
Introduction	..... 1
Communication/Non-Communication: Patterns of Conversation.	..... 3
Inside Out: Silent Communication	..... 5
Light and shadow	..... 8
Freedom in Confinement: Two Sides to A Story	..... 10
Material and Process	..... 14
Exhibition elements	..... 19
Sensitivity and vulnerability	..... 24
Conclusion	..... 26
Addendum	..... 27
Bibliography	..... 30
Figures	..... 32

List of Figures

Figure 1: <i>Patterns of Conversation</i> , monoprint, 2016	..... 3, 32
Figure 2: an early sociogram by Jacob Levy Moreno, published in the New York Times, April 13th 1933	..... 4, 33
Figure 3: <i>Silent Communication</i> , lick and torn Kozo paper, 2016	..... 5, 34
Figure 4: John Cage, <i>4' 33"</i> , 1952	..... 6, 35
Figure 5: Isamu Noguchi, <i>Akari</i> , 1951	..... 8, 36
Figure 6: <i>Two Sides to A Story</i> , lithograph on kozo paper, resin coated, 2017	..... 11, 37
Figure 7: <i>Mirror Obscura</i> , lithograph and sheet glass lamination, 2017	..... 12, 38
Figure 8: optical illusion of vase vs face	..... 12, 39
Figure 9: <i>Portalis</i>	..... 19, 40
Figure 10: <i>Portalis</i> (image of shoji doors)	..... 19, 41
Figure 11: <i>Portalis</i> (image of translucent print)	..... 20, 42
Figure 12: <i>Portalis</i> (image of paper couch)	..... 20, 43
Figure 13: <i>Portalis</i> (image of paper mirrors)	..... 21, 44
Figure 14: <i>Portalis</i> (image of paper lamp)	..... 22, 45
Figure 15: <i>Portalis</i> (image of shadows)	..... 22, 46
Figure 16: <i>Portalis</i> (image after viewer sat on the couch)	..... 27, 47
Figure 17: René Magritte, <i>La trahison des images (Ceci n'est pas une pipe)</i> 1929	..... 28, 48

Introduction

The fast-paced world we choose to partake and live in today often reinforces a self that is out of touch personally, spiritually and socially, and can cause a disconnect that separates us from each other and/or ourselves. Many technological changes have dramatically altered the landscape of human interaction and connection. With our daily use of computers, smart phones, and other technological advances, we live in an age of constant and instant global connectivity. We are more connected to one another today in a manner never before in human history, yet somehow, many of us are increasingly feeling more disconnected. The pace of change in our modern world socially, ideologically, spiritually, politically, and technologically can be overwhelming and demanding of us in ways that drive us apart, as much as it intends to connect us and bring us together. An example might be the amount of time we allow ourselves to spend in the digital world of social media inventing a perception of who we believe ourselves to be, overwhelming an honest account of who we are in actuality. While reflecting on personal experiences that are inseparable from the broad backdrop of world events, I make an attempt to understand the complexities of the current human condition and the lack of human connection experienced.

The MFA thesis exhibition entitled *Portalis* attempts to bring my art and its related research to connect the personal to the public through a practice of vulnerability to material. It is through the use of the thin kozo paper's material vulnerability that I am able to expose my private emotional vulnerability. *Portalis* is an installation based on a personal reflection of the relationship that exist between myself and others, both online and offline. In the exhibition, I utilize paper to create 2 and 3 dimensional paper objects such as shoji screens, a print, a couch, a collection of mirrors, and a floor lamp. They are stand-ins or representative avatars of the subject

matter I am seeking to address; the human connection that is so often missing in our modern lives. In this exhibition, I create a space that strives to be individual and communal at the same time, an environment dedicated to shared silence and a place of contemplation. A place we can gather together and yet be alone, a place we can find value in vulnerability.

It is important for me to note that as a printmaker, it is currently my intention to find a way to print my ideas in the space, or spaces, that exists between the two and three dimensional experiences of art. In other words, I strive to use innovative methods to deal with paper and traditional print, while simultaneously retaining and preserving the tradition of print but also propelling it forward, expanding the media and practice by pushing it to the edges of its artistic potential.

This paper is divided into 7 sections, preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion. In each of these section, I will provide a personal narrative and contextual overview of my work with specific references that are relevant to my thesis exhibition.

Communication/Non-Communication: Patterns of Conversation

I was born in Japan and raised in Malaysia, my mother is Japanese and my father is Chinese. For majority of my life I have felt as though I have been trapped adjusting between dualities and pulled between poles. I spent a lot of my childhood traveling, and was raised in the midst of stark contrasts-between landscapes, race, economic extremes, and the cultural artifacts of Malaysia's colonial past; a nexus of East and West. These contrasts have all contributed to my interest in paradoxes and have encouraged my interest in observing and analyzing seemingly duplicitous outcomes and behaviors. These contrasts create a sense of tension which I consistently explore. Along with this interest in contrasts and observation, the fact that I am a product of the digital world since the early 1990s and have witnessed the rapid growth and changes of technology has greatly informed my current work. As a young adult living in the digital age, I yearn for more in life than just an abundance of likes, views, comments and "friends" online. I have been slowly recognizing the darker side of technology and social media, and more importantly, at the cost of human intimacy and connection. As I have grown older, my childhood interest in general observation and analysis developed into a specific interest in observing and analyzing the invisible forces of social interactions. The disconnect I felt and still feel due to instances of shallow online communication contributed to my interest in the differences between social interactions online and offline.

Patterns of Conversation (figure 1) is a print series I made before I officially became a graduate student at the University of Hawaii, Manoa in 2016. This print series which is echoed in my current work, emerged from a memory of a particular experience that I had in a group setting, where I found myself feeling slightly anxious when there was a long pause during a

conversation. It was only silence, yet it had a strong presence and was profound experience. I have had similar experiences since then, witnessing various responses from myself and others to silence, alone and/or in a group setting. While there are uncomfortable situations that occur with and in silence, I have also experienced an intimacy that can happen in silence. In *Patterns of Conversation*, spatial orientation and communication are rendered in a two- dimensional space that illustrates the impression of a three-dimensional topography of group conversations. In this series, a group of dots and lines are used as graphic representations of the structure and patterns of group interactions, as well as, the flow of conversations between individuals and within groups. These marks are physically made onto a sheet of acetate, by poking. These acetates are then used as plates to print from. These patterns are used to record social communications, groupings, and hierarchy, as well as, a social silence, which is similarly referenced in Jacob L. Moreno's sociograms.¹ A sociogram (figure 2) is a visual depiction of relationships between a specific 1 group. Its purpose is to uncover the underlying relationships between people. The relationships amongst these groups and subgroups - the cliques, the individually isolated, and overall collective social structures, are explored through these prints.

It was through the making of these prints, observing and paying attention to communication, verbal and non-verbal, online and offline that i cultivated an interest in silence and how it is intrinsically tied to social implications. Within a conversation with another, or the self, silence serves as both substance and deprivation in that, it can signify an absence, or as a presence. Social silence can often take form as secret codes. Silence, in a social context, is complex and profound.

¹ Donald R. Brown and Don Harvey, "An Experiential Approach to Organization Development 8th ed.", Boston: Prentice Hall, 2011, 134

Inside Out: Silent Communication

The shift from working in a public, communal studio to working in a solo, private studio occurred when I started graduate school. Working alone, I experienced a different type of silence. This shifted the relationship I had with my work, I started to limit myself to making only in my studio with only certain materials but it made me pay closer attention to how I make, and how I feel when I make, and how to be present with the work. In other words, my work started to direct more inwardly.

When I first moved into my private graduate studio, the silence in my studio stood out to me. After all, I had been working in a shared studio for many years as a printmaker, printer, teaching assistant and studio manager. The idea of socially contextual silence, or more specifically, my own personal experience with silence in a private and public setting, brings up some intriguing questions. Such as what the significance of silence is and if there are any benefits from immersing oneself in silence in the practice of art making? As an artist interested in social interactions, and specifically as an act of personal engagement, silence has played a crucial role in the act of art making and observation in my studio.

This shift of environment gave birth to *Silent Communication* (figure 3), a piece made through a practice of immersion in silence while in the process of making. *Silent Communication* was informed in practice by contemplating the concept of silence, solitude, social structures and communication. The result was something I found to be quite surprising. Prior to this piece, all of my pieces were made in a communal space, which is the printmaking studio. It wasn't until I was provided a studio as a graduate student that I retreated from making in the communal

printmaking studio to making in my own private studio. The works I have made in that private space are seemingly the polar opposite of the works I made outside of it. Prior to having my own private space, I was making only two dimensional prints that were heavy and with color. Everything I have made thus far in the confines of my private studio have a quietness to them, an inwardness. It is in my dimly lit private studio where I adhere to a rigorous schedule of quietude that I started paying closer attention to how I make art in practice.

My primary substrate for *Silent Communication* is a stack of blank paper. The use of paper as my primary substrate can be viewed as an abstraction of the idea of unspoken communication and silence as a literal representation of that communication by the nature of its manufactured purpose. In other words, silence can be represented in the blankness of paper not utilized as a substrate for the transport of information, but as a substrate that emphasizes its importance as a material. In this case, the absence of information in a two-dimensional sense is representative of silence, which its three dimensional employment is what activates its message as art. It is also a traditional material of printmaking utilized in an abstract and non-traditional way. In the process of making *Silent Communication*, I repetitively lick at a paper substrate in silence to help distress the material and then tear it to reform the paper into a three dimensional representational expression of my ideas of unspoken language. The use of my tongue in this case, is also important because the tongue is used in speech and is the metaphorical organ of language but in my process, is secondary and mute. Although, I lick and tear paper in silence, as quietly as I possibly can, but there is still sound in and throughout production.

The American experimental composer, John Cage is essential in my research to conceptualizing and understanding silence. He is known for his noteless piece *4'33"*, commonly

known as Cage's "silent" piece (figure 4). It is arguably his most famous and controversial piece and was composed in 1952. The audience at the premiere was prepared to listen to this piece, but instead, the audience was subjected to 4 minutes and 33 seconds of "silence". The performer's silence allowed the sounds of the surroundings and audience members to become the music itself. Similar to John Cage, where he used a piano, an instrument that is meant to make sounds, as a frame for silence instead. Like Cage, I believe that complete silence cannot exist. Cage was inspired by his visit to the Anechoic Chamber at Harvard University in 1951. The Anechoic Chamber is a room designed in such a way that the ceilings, floors and walls absorb all sounds made in the room. Cage entered the chamber expecting to hear silence, but he wrote later, "I heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation." (Kane 161) Cage believed that if you regard every sound as you would music, you just might hear something unexpected, something you wouldn't hear otherwise, and it could be something beautiful. At its core, *4'33"* isn't about listening to nothing, but instead, to everything. It is this type of awareness of self, self-action, and of environment, that I attempted to convey, employ, and consider while making *Silent Communication*.

Light and Shadow

Aside from the shift from public to private, the lighting in my studio played a crucial role in shaping my current work. In my studio, I work with one main table light and find comfort when shrouded in dimness. Scientifically, the iris dilates and makes the pupil opening larger to increase the amount of light that enters your eye in dim light, this is representative of my quest in finding the core of my concerns. My encounter with shadow was limited while working in a communal printmaking studio, this is because the lighting is bright. In my dimly lit private studio, there are dark pockets around the room and cast silhouettes of things present, and I felt the need to work with my shadows, literally and philosophically. I find the working space of an artist is visually telling, the objects I accumulated over the years, the work I've made in that studio are all dots I connected and am connecting. In my dimly lit studio, the lack of light activates the visible and invisible/ hidden layers of meaning within my work. This is expressed most obviously in the translucence of my work. The drama and weight of my current artworks are most readily experienced when lit in a way that emphasizes the material I have used. The devotion to slow making and interest in tactility is something I personally am striving for as well. These concepts are carried through to my current thesis exhibition.

The sculptor Isamu Noguchi worked in themes similar to mine in his use of light as an element of illumination, literally and metaphorically. I have found a kindred spirit in his themes of quietude, slowing down and inward reflection. I also admire Noguchi's work reflecting his belief in the social significance of sculpture. He often called attention to his works inherent dichotomies. In his work he merged the modern with the traditional, light and shadow, geometric and organic forms, and found value in both positive and negative space. Dichotomies are also

prevalent in my work, which can be viewed as examples of absence and presence, light and dark, positive and negative, and an interest in the private and public aspects of social interaction and how it relates to the self. In 1951, Noguchi created *Akari* (figure 5) which means “light as illumination” at the request of the mayor of Gifu, Japan, to modernize the local lantern designs. These paper lamps are currently shown in *Akari: Sculpture by Other Means* at the Noguchi Museum in the form of several installations. Each lamp was handmade by craftsmen in Gifu City, Japan, which means that each is utterly unique. “They are testaments to imperfection. They’re about humanizing the world,” says Dakin Hart, the exhibition curator during an interview. “Noguchi saw them as a counterweight to an increasingly mechanized and industrialized society. That’s why it feels like home.”²

² Schwab, Katherine, *The Secret History of the Paper Lantern Lamp*, Fast Company & Inc, Mansueto Ventures, 03.02.18, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90162330/the-secret-history-of-the-paper-lantern-lamp>

Freedom in Confinement: Two Sides to A Story

It is currently my intention to find a way to print my ideas in the space or spaces that exists between the two and three dimensional ways that we experience art. Simply stated, I want to find a way to harness and amplify the imagery of a two dimensional print while capturing the weight and presence of a three dimensional object. In this I am searching for a new way to expand my intentions as an artist and to breakthrough the limitations of the traditional ways of approaching paper and printmaking. Limitations such as utilizing only paper, resin and glue in my studio practice has been a way for me to push myself as an artist, as well as the medium. I am also constrained by the act of working alone in my studio, which is the polar opposite of my previous experience of being involved in the traditionally communal environment of print and print studios. As a choice, the constraint of working alone in the dark has informed and influenced the choices I make as an artist. I don't know if I would have come to the same conclusions and choices had I not imposed a solitary environment on myself and my practice.

Often, constraints are important for me in the genesis of creating new ideas. When these constraints present challenges, they define the problem and inform my focus. Limitations and constraints are used in my work to my advantage, and as a stimulus to find alternative ways to make. The results are often surprising, sometimes negative and sometimes successful, but always informative and reflective of my creative curiosity. My interest in confronting material and philosophical challenges goes back to my childhood and was cultivated through the stories and teachings of my father, who grew up in poverty. In a way, his teaching and philosophy snuck into my studio practice, the notion of less is more, and my ability to embrace complex and often contradictory forces is prevalent in my work.

In Søren Kierkegaard's first major book *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard argued that the life we are looking for can be found by embracing less, and not more. (A notion shared by my father and Kierkegaard)

“A solitary prisoner for life is extremely resourceful; to him a spider can be a source of great amusement. Think of our school days; we were at an age when there was no aesthetic consideration in the choosing of our teachers, and therefore they were often very boring—how resourceful we were then! What fun we had catching a fly, keeping it prisoner under a nutshell, and watching it run around with it! What delight in cutting a hole in the desk, confining a fly in it, and peeking at it through a piece of paper! How entertaining it can be to listen to the monotonous dripping from the roof! What a meticulous observer one becomes, detecting every little sound or movement.”³

Kierkegaard's insight of constraint and how one can view the same thing differently through the challenge of perspective is something I relate to and have experienced first hand. With that in mind, I created *Two Sides to A Story*, (figure 6) a small-scale installation that consists of a series of suspended larger scale lithographic prints that are printed in white ink, on white paper, and then coated in resin. The inherent limitations of a two dimensional substrate has provided me with a great opportunity for creative exploration and artistic expression. It is embracing the challenges of technical and material limitations that has been a resource of inspiration for me. Meeting the challenges of materials that have functionally limited means of manipulation as a substrate is something I despise and enjoy. As an artist, I am trying to find a way to speak the unspoken through materials that traditionally already speak or enter meaning.

³ Kierkegaard, Søren, Howard V. Hong, and Edna H. Hong. *The Essential Kierkegaard*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000. Print. Pg 56

Trying to reassign meaning through different techniques and manipulation of those materials is challenging and gratifying as an artistic pursuit.

These translucent larger scale lithographs attempt to capture the nature and importance of shifting one's perspective. The decision for coating my prints with resin came from the limitation of scale I experienced when I was attempting to achieve translucency by combining sheet glass with prints through lamination in *Mirror Obscura* (figure 7). Although I am a printmaker, I have experiences and skills in many other fields. I took what I learned from glass and applied it to my printmaking practice. In this work, an illusory sense of depth is activated by the transparency it presents. This is an important conceptual device in my work. It is through this conceptual device that I began to explore alternative techniques for manipulating paper in a new way that I haven't before explored. These larger scale prints go through multiple stages of transformation resulting in a paradoxical convergence of presence and absence, the positive and negative, opacity and translucency, as well as strength and fragility. These prints constantly oscillate between these paradoxes and touch on the ethereal and transient nature of illusion. The prints are displayed in suspension, away from walls, and are allowed to move and change with time and space. The comprehensive effect of these prints when viewed brings to mind optical illusions that are capable of dual or multilayered interpretation. This is important because it represents the many layers of social stratification that we must read and interpret in order to understand each other.

A comparative example might be the well-known illusion of a vase that turns into two faces (figure 8). I find the importance in shifting ones perspective as a way to see and/or feel how others see and/or feel. Trying to see things from another person's point of view and feel what that person is feeling is empathy and thus shows compassion. This is something that I believe is

lacking in our modern world, thus my prints try to accommodate many levels of viewing without enforcing one in particular, this is physically and materially realized through the constant shifting of what is visible and what isn't with the use of light and shadow.

Material and Process

I often work from a place that begins in frustration and thus challenge. This is because I work knowing not what I will be making but instead, by sensing into what I have not yet confronted or attempted artistically. Each new endeavor begins with a challenge to explore new ways of making art. This practice allows me to begin my endeavors by presenting myself with problem solving challenges. I believe we unfold out of ourselves, after you've made one step, the next step reveals itself. The processes of making for me also acts as a trigger for which remembrance is made active, the function of remembering implies the production of objects. In other words, I also search for my memories through solitary immersive making.

This practice brought to mind a quote by Agnes Martin, a painter. I can relate very much to her ideology and work that has been described as an “essay in discretion on inwardness and silence.”⁴ What Agnes Martin said in an interview published in ArtNews in 1976 still resonates with me:

“Toward freedom is the direction that the artist takes. Art work comes straight through a free mind—an open mind. Absolute freedom is possible. We gradually give up things that disturb us and cover our mind. And with each relinquishment, we feel better. You think it would be easy to discover what is blinding you, but it isn't so easy. It's pride and fear that cover the mind.” She continues, “Some people don't believe they have pride and fear, because they've been conditioned on pride and fear. But all of us have it. If we don't think we have it, then that's a

⁴ Rachel Spence, “*Agnes Martin: the quiet American*”, *Financial Times*, 5 June 2015, www.ft.com/content/22341ab2-091f-11e5-b643-00144feabdc0

deceit of pride. Pride practices all kinds of deceptions. It's very, very tricky. To recognize and overcome fear and pride, in order to have freedom of mind, is a long process.”⁵

Another artist who considers this notion of making with an open mind, confronting fear and not knowing is Ann Hamilton. She is known for her sensitivity to material and ephemeral large-scale installations, and finds knowledge through making. Her work resonates with me in a profound way. She describes a similar understanding in her essay *Making Not Knowing*, “One doesn't arrive - in words or in art - by necessarily knowing where one is going. In every work of art something appears that does not previously exist, and so by default, you work from what you know and what you don't know.”⁶

Paper making is an integral part of my practice and is crucial to the development and production of my thesis project in so far as it allows me to dive deeper into process and personal connection with my materials and myself. I find many processes fascinating but the process of paper making in particular, reminds me how individual fibers can make up a sheet of sturdy paper, and this never ceases to amaze me. It reinforces my belief of how everything is connected, even as you can see the whole, you can see all the parts and, that you - we go back and forth between those. This oscillation is important also to my practice.

While learning to make paper, I found myself dealing with topics that were far more personal and fragmented. Confronting these subject matters was no easy task and still isn't- to do things I'm afraid of, to address the things I don't know or fear, to go to a territory that I have ever

⁵ John Gruen, ‘*Agnes Martin: “Everything, everything is about feeling...feeling and recognition”*’, *Art News*, vol.75, no.7, September 1976

⁶ Mary J. Jacob and Jacquelyn Baas, “*Learning Mind: Experience into Art.*”, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2009, 91

been, but the use and practice of solitary making in silence and darkness has helped me problem solve with patience and inner reflection. I find paper to closely represent as a material, the intentions I have as an artist. Specifically because I identify with its inherent duality and its presumed vulnerability, both of which, are a theme and subject of my practice and interests as an artist. Paper can be both fragile and strong at the same time. Paper can also be important in the information it carries while physically itself not be important at all. The duplicity of the uses and physicality of paper is a theme that as an artist, I am constantly aware of and informed by. Drawing from the nature of the media itself, I make statements about the natural endurance and perceived fragility of extra and intra-personal experiences, and connections related to myself and the world in which we live. For me, paper can represent a direct reference to my own strength and vulnerability in the experiences I have had, both personal and non personal.

Through learning to make paper and embracing the processes of paper making, along with my knowledge of mold making, I have been repetitively casting mirror frames in paper, specifically decorative wall mirrors. I made these paper mirror frames without knowing exactly why I felt the need to do so, but through trusting my own intuition. I knew I wanted to continue casting paper objects since the moment I finished my first paper mirror; a physical genesis of my thesis. The casting of paper mirror frames made me question what a mirror is, does, stands for and more. The mirror is first and foremost an object that I am personally fascinated with, both psychologically and physically. It was core to philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia as a kind of space of simultaneity and otherness, which is neither here nor there, that is simultaneously physical and mental, such as the moment you see yourself in the mirror.⁷ The

⁷ Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1971. Print.

mirror has an inherent quality of duality that I identify with, it possesses the potential to connect and/or disconnect the self and the other, it can be used as a tool for reflecting on both personal realities and external issues. The mirror can also be used as a tool to reinforce the importance in shifting one's perspective to recognize other ways of seeing. Mirrors are reflective of ourselves and the world but in a way that is opposite and sometimes deceiving in how we interpret its reflection with the personality we bring to the reflection. By casting paper mirror frames, these mirrors are stripped of its original function and instead speak of its potential.

The transformative processes, in which these paper objects are made is equally important to their comprehensive meaning. These paper objects are made through the contradictory processes of separating and seaming, of attempting to control, of allowing lack of control, and represents the act of conscious and unconscious decision making as well. The tension this creates is important to me. It also allows me to push myself directly when dealing with a monotonous and lengthy process. The tedium of this process include but is not limited to tearing little pieces of paper which are applied to the surface of a clear translucent silicone mold I have made from an object I wish to cast. When glue is applied on to the paper, the paper softens and then molds its shape to the contours of the silicone mold. The paper in turn becomes translucent when wet with glue and in turn makes it hard for me to distinguish paper from silicone. The decision to use a clear silicone mold is intentional. I find this process of using clear silicone to be fascinating. The fact that I eventually have a hard time seeing where I have laid paper and where I haven't, gets to be quite hard on my eyes. It take approximately 3 days to make one mirror this way as I have to pay very close attention when I make, and sometimes I have to force myself to stop to let the paper dry completely in order to see where I am working on. This process can be extremely

tedious, frustrating, time consuming, repetitive and laborious, but is also representative of my practice in that, it is through the struggles that I have found my own voice as an artist.

Exhibition elements

In my thesis exhibition entitled *Portalis* (Figure 9), I create a space that can be individual and communal at the same time, an environment dedicated to shared silence and contemplation. The installation is primarily void of color other than the different values and opacities of white paper, this allows viewers to focus on the form and emotional impact of the paper objects without much distraction. All the items chosen (shoji doors, print, couch, mirror and lamp) have autobiographical associations, and are also ghostly stand-ins or representative avatars of the human condition and suggest emotions/sensations with respect to a lack of intimate connection in the contemporary world. It is through the material vulnerability of paper that I am able to expose my private emotional vulnerability.

I. Shoji Doors (Figure 10)

My installation consists of one dimly lit room that can only be accessed by crossing a threshold or entering through a portal, which is flanked by shoji screen doors. The faint light coming through the shoji screens from inside the space is inviting and luring. Similar to a space from a childhood memory of my grandfathers house in Japan, a room that I was not allowed to enter into. Yet the warm light that came through the smoke like veil of the shoji was so inviting that I often poked through the shoji just so I could see through to the other side. The lure of comfort that I believe existed beyond the veil of that shoji was irresistible and safe. It was as if I was a moth drawn to the light of a lamp. This comfort and lure that I experienced is something I want the viewers to experience. In the exhibition, these doors are permanently left open to invite the viewers into the installation space.

II. Print (Figure 11)

Directly in front of the entrance will be a large translucent print. Its translucency allows the viewer to see through the print to a certain extent but also acts as a partition between people, a thin sheer membrane which acts as a barrier between the outside and the inside. The large resin coated lithograph also presents the viewer with a contemplative visual paradox of presence and absence, the positive and negative, opacity and translucency, as well as strength and fragility. The print shifts between these paradoxes and touches on the ethereal and transience. The print is displayed in suspension, away from walls, and is allowed to move and change with time and space. The comprehensive effect of the print when viewed brings to mind the many layers of social stratification that we must read and interpret in order to understand each other. It is also important for me to include a print within this exhibition because it represents the start of my journey as an artist and represents letting my guard down in attempt to connect with others.

III. Couch (Figure 12)

Inside the room behind the print is a two person couch. The decision on including a couch in my installation is largely based on my personal experience of being on the couch at my friends place, where I spent sitting or laying in need of comfort or rest when I had nowhere to stay. Through this experience, I learned that a couch can be a safe space, as well as an intimate object that holds your body off the ground, takes your weight, thus allowing one to have moments where the responsibility for holding the body upright is abdicated. We also learn the physicalness of personal space and ways to create, or eliminate meaningful distance by shifting slightly here or there on the intimacy of a couch. It is both a very personal and public space. A couch can be used by an individual or as a communal object. The couch is to

me a reminder that we exist in connection with others personally, domestically, and publicly, because a couch, especially a two person couch is intended for an intimate sitting and sharing experience. It is an instrument for rest that is made for one or more people that is intentionally intimate and personal as a piece of furniture.

IV. Mirrors (Figure 13)

Above the paper couch is a collection of suspended paper mirror frames. These paper mirror frames speak of self reflection, fragility and strength, of looking beyond our naked eye, and how we perceive/ frame things. Aside from the difference in quantity, the mirrors for my thesis exhibition were made with a clear intention of approaching making art with vulnerability. Each mirror is slightly different and these differences occur through the fact that I am in a slightly different space each time I make them (physically, emotionally and mentally). Mirrors are an important part of this exhibition personally, as much as they are important thematically. My own connections to mirrors are as profound and personal as they are common and universal to everyone. I believe that we all have a dual love/ hate relationship with mirrors. Our relationship with mirrors are universal in that we all experience some form of identity that must reinforce itself through reflection. Mirrors reinforce our sense of self as much as they frustrate and intimidate our sense of self. Ever since I was a little girl, I've felt uncomfortable looking at my own reflection. Now as an adult, I sometimes find myself avoiding looking at my reflection in the mirror as it seems so superficial and shallow.

Growing up, I watched my mother put on makeup in front of the mirror every morning. She would explain to me that putting on makeup before leaving the house is a way of

demonstrating manners in public, and as women, we have to take care of our appearance because that's all we've got. I never fully agreed with that notion as a woman, and to be fair, she grew up in Japan during a different time that reinforced those beliefs. Further along in my youth, when all my mother's hair fell out as a result of chemotherapy, I witnessed a change in her behavior towards herself in the mirror. Suddenly the frankness of the reflection within the mirror was brutal and honest. This dual nature of the mirror factors directly into my inquiry as an artist interested in duality.

V. Lamp (Figure 14)

A floor lamp is another element present at the space, but the bulb is absent to hint at the gift of darkness. I think about this metaphor often while sitting in near darkness and making art. I find that in the near darkness, I am able to see things I am not able to in the light. I am reminded of the times I felt disappointed when the bright city lights blinded me from seeing the night's more subtle appearances, specifically, the stars. In silence and in near darkness is where I find peace of mind.

VI. Light and Shadow (Figure 15)

The use of light and shadow in my studio and in the exhibition is a strategy I utilize in order to see the things I normally would not be able to see, a nod to the importance in shifting one's perspective. With an individual soft and warm light that sits on my studio table, I am able to see individual fibers clearer than I can with the gleaming full white studio light on. It also helps me to stay present with my thoughts while making. In short, I use a specific lighting as a way for me to see my own "shadows". Psychologist Carl Jung wrote in his book *Psychology and Religion*, "Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the

individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is.”⁸ In other words, if left alone, the “shadow” can gradually thicken and create a veil of illusion of what is real. I believe that the digital world plays a big part in fogging our view from what is real and important. The shadow represents everything that we refuse to acknowledge about ourselves and I find importance in making an attempt to see these “shadows”, because I believe that when we do, we become aware of those qualities and impulses we deny in ourselves and thus produce a wider consciousness than before.

⁸ Jung, C.G. (1938). "Psychology and Religion." In CW 11: *Psychology and Religion: West and East*. 131

Sensitivity and Vulnerability

In this exhibition, I strive to create a space that can be individual and communal at the same time in terms of its shared private experience, and an environment dedicated to shared silence and contemplation. Being fascinated with the multiplicitous nature of paper as material, I want to provide the audience with an opportunity to experience the papers simultaneous vulnerability and strength, as well as the installations quietude. It is through this material vulnerability that I am able to expose my private emotional vulnerability through my practice as an artist.

Brene Brown, the author of *Daring Greatly* is a social work researcher who spent the past two decades studying courage, vulnerability, shame and empathy. She describes the fundamental role of human connection as “it is why we are here”. Her research explores the fundamental nature of vulnerability in human connection that, “in order to have connection you have to let yourself be really seen,” that is, you must risk letting others see your vulnerability.⁹ By turning myself inside out, that is, by exposing my own “weaknesses” to the viewer, I have engendered the potential for deeply felt connection between the work and the viewer. Brown writes in her book *Daring Greatly*, “our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection.”¹⁰ Exposing my humanity has been a catalyst for meaningful connection, for allowing the viewer to move beyond the physicality of

⁹ Brown, Brené, "The Power of Vulnerability." Brené Brown: The Power of Vulnerability | TED Talk | TED.com. Accessed May 02, 2017. https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability#t-323361 .

¹⁰ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, (New York: Avery Publishing, 2012), p. 02.

the work and enter the emotional and psychological space that is alluded. It is my wish to draw the observer's attention to the poetic, as well as, the social and domestic inferences and dimensions of everyday objects. This is done most obviously by changing the function and reality of those objects, as well as by turning usable utilitarian and domestic objects into useless paper copies of their former selves.

In this exhibition, staying sensitive acts as the doorway, the point of access for myself and the viewer to enter the work and potentially connect with the work, each other, and ourselves. Sensitivity is an important concept in my practice, I found myself alarmed, delighted, and humbled at the limitations of my ordinary looking. I have noticed through my making that I unconsciously block out some uncomfortable thoughts and emotions, missing the events unfolding in my body, mind and spirit. My consolation is that this deficiency is quite human. Philosopher and psychologist William James describes this when he wrote, "My experience is what I agree to attend to."¹¹ We see, but we do not see; we use our eyes, but our gaze is glancing and rushed. We are in no way blinded, but we have blinders on. This sensitivity has led my artistic practice to often be anchored in quiescent contemplation that is evident in the materials that I choose and the form in which those materials are realized and made accessible.

¹¹ James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Dover Publications, 1950. Print. 403

Conclusion

The emotional response to art is uniquely human. It opens our minds, changes the way we think and act, and encourages empathy. Looking differently can make you feel differently, and feeling differently can make you act differently vice-versa and so on and so forth. The spatial ambience of my installation can be interpreted as a site for new exchanges between viewers and the works I present, a space that gives and makes the opportunity for an experience, but not determine what that is. Arjun Mulder, an Amsterdam based author and art critic defines this kind of dynamism in architectural space as a form of systemic interactivity.¹² The “default state of any living system, in the way that any system can be considered interactive if it links into, and affects change upon another,” (Mulder 332) is an idea that informs the space I have created for my installation. The interactive space described by Mulder is something I strive for, where participation of the audience and process of exchange are heightened by the conditions of ambience. Through this exhibition, I communicate my humanity in hopes to make a connection with the observer on a human level that is unspoken and yet relatable. My intention is to affect change of the observers emotional and sympathetic state by creating a space that can be individual and communal at the same time in terms of its shared private experience, a place we can find value in vulnerability and an environment dedicated to shared silence and contemplation.

¹² Arjun Mulder. “*The Object of Interactivity*.” NOX: Machining Architecture. London: Thames and Hudson, 2004. 332-340.

Addendum

Marcel Duchamp, a pioneering and leading figure in the Dada movement, argued that both the artist and the viewer are necessary for the completion of a work of art. He believed that the creation of art begins with the artist but is not completed until it is placed out in the world to be viewed by others. This is a belief that I share. Duchamp explained in his talk entitled *The Creative Act*, “All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.”¹³

The enveloping nature of an installation art, such as *Portalis*, coincides with an expectation for the presence of a viewer who engages the space, thus completes the artwork. I observed people engaging with my paper installation in various ways that I was not able to foresee prior to the opening. Some people shared stories with me about how the installation made them feel and think, some were moved and even brought to tears, others visited my exhibition to find comfort and peace, while some just did not like it.

What I found to be most interesting after the show opened was the fact that many people poked at, touched and tried to sit on the paper couch specifically (Figure 16), and I found that to be fascinating. As I was able to speak with a few of them, most said that it was because the paper couch looked so real that they were not able to distinguish the artwork from the actual object. I

¹³ Duchamp, Marcel, Marcel Duchamp, Marc Dachy, Richard Hamilton, George H. Hamilton, Jean-Luc Fafchamps, Marcel Duchamp, Marcel Duchamp, and Marcel Duchamp. *The Creative Act*. Brussels, Belgium: Sub Rosa Records, 1994. Sound recording.

believe that this was the same case for my roommate's cat that jumped on my first paper couch while I was away for 5 minutes. I came back to the room and found my paper couch on the ground. This experience brought to mind a famous painting by René Magritte, *La trahison des images* (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*) (1929), French for “The Treachery of Images” (This is not a pipe) (Figure 17). According to Michel Foucault who offers us an interpretation of Magritte’s painting in his essay “This is not a Pipe” (1973), “Magritte’s painting cautions us against making overly facile connections between art and the physical realm.”¹⁴ In short, this is not a pipe, because it is a painting of a pipe, not the pipe itself. Magritte sought to have his viewers question the very ability of a painting to truly represent an ordinary object. With that said, his work gracefully challenges the audience’s perceptions of reality.

In a way, I am also challenging the viewers perception of reality by turning functional objects into paper objects to evoke an emotional landscape that is a result of my frustration with the digital age and the deterioration of interpersonal relationships due to it. In other words, I have invited the viewers into a strange yet familiar environment to experience my perspective of today’s current state of disconnect and my belief that with vulnerability comes a deeper understanding of who we are, and can build a stronger connection to ourselves and others.

Paper has memory and can remember the physical impressions we place upon it. I have been continually impressed with the memory of the paper objects in my installation. I am also very intrigued by the subsequent memory that is added onto the paper objects through the viewers physical interaction with the these delicate objects. By exhibiting my work in a public space, I

¹⁴ Porter, James E. “This Is Not a Review of Foucault's This Is Not a Pipe.” *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1986, pp. 210–219. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/466040.

am opening up to others, trusting the viewers and giving up a measure of control over my work.

Through the viewer's tactile interactions with these paper objects, the forms of these objects eventually weaken and change due to additional layers of physical memories that is brought forth by the viewers.

Bibliography

Arjun Mulder. *The Object of Interactivity*. NOX: Machining Architecture. London: Thames and Hudson, 2004. Print.

Baas, Jacquelynn, and Mary J. Jacob. *Learning Mind: Experience into Art*. Chicago, Ill: School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2009. Print.

Brown, Brené, *The Power of Vulnerability*. TED Talk, TED.com. 2017. https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability#t-323361

Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. New York: Avery Publishing, 2012. Print.

Brown, Donald R. *An Experiential Approach to Organization Development*. Boston: Prentice Hall, 2011. Print.

Cage, John. *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1961. Print.

Cage, John, and Julia Robinson. *The Anarchy of Silence: John Cage and Experimental Art*. Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2009. Print.

Dehaene, Michiel, and Lieven . Cauter. *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*. 2008. Print.

Donald R. Brown and Don Harvey, *An Experiential Approach to Organization Development 8th ed.*, Boston: Prentice Hall, 2011. Print

Duchamp, Marcel, Marcel Duchamp, Marc Dachy, Richard Hamilton, George H. Hamilton, Jean-Luc Fafchamps, Marcel Duchamp, Marcel Duchamp, and Marcel Duchamp. *The Creative Act*. Brussels, Belgium: Sub Rosa Records, 1994. Sound recording.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1971. Print.

Horowitz, Alexandra. *On Looking: Eleven Walks with Expert Eyes*. 2013. Print.

James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Dover Publications, 1950. Print.

John Gruen, ‘Agnes Martin:”Everything, everything is about feeling...feeling and recognition”’, Art News, vol.75, no.7, September 1976

Jung, C G. *Psychology and Religion*. 1938. Print.

- Kane, Brian. *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice*. 2014. Internet resource.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/or*. Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1959. Print.
- Kierkegaard, Søren, Howard V. Hong, and Edna H. Hong. *The Essential Kierkegaard*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000. Print.
- Lauterbach, Ann. *The Night Sky: Writings on the Poetics of Experience*. New York: Penguin Books, 2008. Print.
- Melchior-Bonnet, Sabine. *The Mirror: A History*. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Mary J. Jacob and Jacquelyn Baas, *Learning Mind: Experience into Art*. School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2009. Print
- Porter, James E. “This Is Not a Review of Foucault's This Is Not a Pipe.” *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1986, pp. 210–219. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/466040.
- Spence, Rachel, *Agnes Martin: the quiet American*. Financial Times, 5 June 2015, www.ft.com/content/22341ab2-091f-11e5-b643-00144feabdc0
- Schwab, Katherine, *The Secret History of the Paper Lantern Lamp*, Fast Company & Inc, Mansueto Ventures, 2018, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90162330/the-secret-history-of-the-paper-lantern-lamp>



Figure 1, *Patterns of Conversation*, monograph, 2016

EMOTIONS MAPPED BY NEW GEOGRAPHY

Charts Seek to Portray the
Psychological Currents of
Human Relationships.

New York Times
April 3, 1933

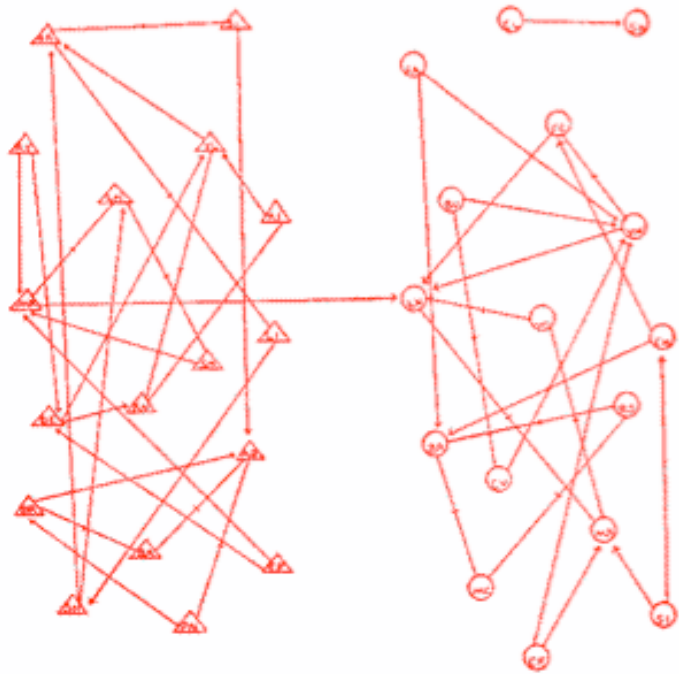


Figure 2, an early sociogram by Jacob Levy Moreno, published in the New York Times,
April 13th 1933



Figure 3, *Silent Communication*, lick and torn Kozo paper, 2016



Figure 4, John Cage, *4' 33"*, 1952



Figure 5, Isamu Noguchi, *Akari*, 1951



Figure 6, *Two Sides to A Story*, lithograph on kozo paper, resin coated, 2017



Figure 7, *Mirror Obscura*, lithograph and sheet glass lamination, 2017



Figure 8, optical illusion of vase vs face



Figure 9, *Portalis*

Photo: Carson James Photography



Figure 10, *Portalis* (image of shoji doors)

Photo: Carson James Photography



Figure 11, *Portalis* (image of translucent print)

Photo: Carson James Photography



Figure 12, *Portalis* (image of paper couch)

Photo: Carson James Photography



Figure 13, *Portalis* (image of paper mirrors)

Photo: Carson James Photography



Figure 14, *Portalis* (image of paper lamp)

Photo: Carson James Photography



Figure 15, *Portalis* (image of shadows)

Photo: Carson James Photography



Figure 16, *Portalis* (image after viewer sat on the couch)



Figure 17, René Magritte, *La trahison des images* (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*), 1929